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Emerson and German Personality

By
Kuno Francke

Reprinted from
THE INTERNATIONAL QUARTERLY,
Burlington, Vermont,
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THE EDITOR.

MS. A. 9. 2 (2 of 30), 1922

EMERSON AND GERMAN PERSONALITY

EMERSON was, above all, an American; the love of his people was the controlling motive of his whole life; and if we were to express the great variety of his interests and sympathies by one central ideal, we could probably find no better name for it than American culture. Next to his own country, England occupied the foremost place in his affections. The history of the English people was to him not only the history of the life of his forefathers, and as such surrounded by the halo of romance, but it stood to him also for a most impressive object lesson, demonstrating the truth of the practical side of his own message, the teachings of self-reliance, tenacity of purpose, and common sense. It was through his delicate sense of artistic form that Emerson was drawn toward Italy and France; and no one who has read his estimates of Montaigne or Michelangelo can fail to see that, Puritan as he was, he had a keen appreciation of the genius of the Latin race. Germany was the only large country of western Europe which he never visited; the only distinguished German with whom he entertained a friendly correspondence, Herman Grimm, crossed his path too late in life to add much to his range of vision. For the greatest German of his time, Goethe, Emerson, in spite of sincere admiration, had after all only a limited understanding; whereas, against the manners of the ordinary Teuton he even seems to have had a natural aversion. Wherein, then, lies the justification for emphasizing, nevertheless, Emerson's relation to Germany? What side of his nature was akin to German ways of thought and feeling? What particular inspiration did he receive from the great masters of German literature and philosophy? What part of his own life-work has a special significance for the Germany of today? These are the questions which I shall attempt briefly to answer.

I.

There is a widely spread notion that Germany is a land trodden down by militarism and bureaucracy. Independence of character and personal initiative, are, we are told, necessarily crushed out by governmental methods which force the individual, from boyhood on, into a system of complicated routine and make him a part of a huge, soulless mechanism. It would be futile to deny that the pressure exerted upon the individual by official authority is greater in Germany than in America, England, France, or

Italy. Indeed, there is good reason for thinking that this very subordination of the individual to superior ordinances has had a large share in the extraordinary achievements of German statecraft, strategy, industry, and science of the last fifty years. What I maintain is this. In spite of the intense supervision of personal conduct, of the supremacy of drill and regulation, of the overwhelming sway of historical tradition and class rule, in spite of all this there is to be found in Germany a decidedly greater variety of individual views, convictions, principles, modes of life, ideals, in other words, of individual character than in America. I do not wish here to analyze the causes of this remarkable phenomenon, beyond stating that one of these causes seems to me to lie in the very existence of those barriers which in Germany restrict and hem in individual activity. It seems as though the pressure from without tended to force to light the life within. Certain it is that the German, while submitting to external limitations which no American or Englishman would tolerate, is wont to guard his intellectual selfhood with a jealous eagerness compared with which the easy adaptation of the American to standards not his own comes near to being moral indifference. His inner life the German seeks to shape himself; here he tolerates no authority or ordinance; here he is his own master; here he builds his own world.

It is easy to see how closely allied was Emerson's whole being to this side of German character. The moderation and harmoniousness of his temper preserved him from the angularity, the oddities and eccentricities which often go with the German insistence on pronounced intellectual personality. On this personality itself he insisted with truly German aggressiveness. Indeed, it may be said that his definition of the scholar as being not a thinker, but man thinking,—a definition which is at the root of Emerson's whole view of intellectual life,—is an essentially German conception, and places Emerson in line with those splendid defenders of personal conviction which have embodied German thought with all its rugged pugnaciousness, from the days of Luther to Lessing and Fichte, and finally to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

A few of the most important manifestations of this German love of spiritual individuality which seem to me to have a special bearing upon Emerson it may be useful to consider.

What else but implicit trust in the supreme value of the inner life is it, if the Germans much more than other nations are given to expressing their contempt for appearances, if they have a delight, sometimes a cynic delight, in exposing shams of any kind, if they take the business of life with a seriousness that often seems to rob it of lightness of movement and the gracefulness of fleeting forms? Goethe's "Faust" is, in this respect

also, a true index of national character. As a work of art it is unwieldy, uneven, volcanic, disconnected, fragmentary, barbaric. Scenes of supreme lyric power, of elemental passion, of deepest tragedy, of ravishing poetry, go side by side with cynic raillery, allegorical stammering, metaphysical lucubrations, bookishness, and pedantry. The sensuous impression of the whole upon an unbiased mind cannot be but bewildering and disquieting. And yet there stands out in it all a mighty personality, a mighty will! The weaknesses, the falsehoods, the frivolities of the day are here unmasked! The real concern of life, ceaseless striving for higher forms of activity, endless endeavor in the rounding out of the inner world, is brought home to us! The very defects and shortcomings of the form reveal the vastness of the spirit which refused to be contracted into limited dimensions! That thoughts like these were familiar to Emerson, that his own habitual state of mind was akin to the temper here described, needs no documentary demonstration. But it may not be out of place to quote a few passages which show how fully conscious he was himself of his affinity to this side of German character:—

“What distinguishes Goethe for French and English readers is a property which he shares with his nation,—an habitual reference to interior truth. The German intellect wants the French sprightliness, the fine practical understanding of the English, and the American adventure; but it has a certain probity, which never rests in a superficial performance, but asks steadily, *To what end?* A German public asks for a controlling sincerity. Here is activity of thought; but what is it for? What does the man mean? Whence, whence all these thoughts?

“Talent alone can not make a writer. There must be a man behind the book; a personality which by birth and quality is pledged to the doctrines there set forth. * * * If he cannot rightly express himself today, the same things subsist and will open themselves tomorrow. There lies the burden on his mind,—the burden of truth to be declared,—more or less understood; and it constitutes his business and calling in the world to see those facts through, and to make them known. What signifies that he trips and stammers; that his voice is harsh and hissing; that his methods or his hopes are inadequate? That message will find method and imagery, articulation and melody. Though he were dumb, it would speak.”

Closely allied with the German contempt for appearances, and, like it, rooted in the high valuation of personality, is the often praised delight of the Germans in small things. He who knows how to enter lovingly into what is outwardly inconspicuous and seemingly insignificant, he who is accustomed to look for fulness of the inner life even in the humblest and most circumscribed spheres of society, to him new worlds will reveal themselves in regions where the hasty, dissatisfied glance discovers nothing but empty space. “Man upon this earth,” says Jean Paul, “would be vanity and hollowness, dust and ashes, vapor and a bubble,—were it not

that he felt himself to be so. That it is possible for him to harbor such a feeling, *this*, by implying a comparison of himself with something higher in himself, this it is which makes him the immortal creature that he is." Here we have the root of that German love for still life, that German capacity for discovering the great in the little, which has given to our literature such incomparable characters as Jean Paul's own Quintus Fixlein, Wilhelm Raabe's Hungerpastor, or Heinrich Seidel's Leberecht Hühnchen, which even today makes Germany the land of all lands where in the midst of the bewildering tumult of industrial and social competition there are to be found hundreds upon hundreds of men firmly determined to resist the mad desire for what is called success, perfectly satisfied to live in a corner, unobserved but observing, at home with themselves, wedded to some task, some ideal which, however little it may have to do with the pretentious and noisy world about them, fills their soul and sheds dignity upon every moment of their existence. Is it necessary to point out that there never lived an American who in this respect was more closely akin to the German temper than Emerson? He was, indeed, the Jean Paul of New England. New England country life, the farm, the murmuring pines, the gentle river, the cattle lowing upon the hills, the quiet study, the neighborly talk in the village store or on the common,—this was the world in which he felt at home, in which he discovered his own personality. Here he fortified himself against the foolish fashions and silly prejudices of so-called society; here he imbibed his lifelong hatred of vulgar ambition; here there came to him that insight into the value of the unpretentious which he has expressed so well, "I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; I embrace the common; I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low"; here he acquired that deep seated and thoroughly German conviction of the dignity of scholastic seclusion and simplicity, which has made his whole life a practical application of his own precept:—

"He (the student) must embrace solitude as a bride. He must have his glees and his glooms alone. His own estimate must be measure enough, his own praise reward enough for him. * * * How mean to go blazing, a gaudy butterfly, in fashionable or political salons, the fool of society, the fool of notoriety, a topic for newspapers, a piece of the street, and forfeiting the real prerogative of the russet coat, the privacy, and the true and warm heart of the citizen!"

The natural counterpart to this high appreciation of seemingly small and insignificant things,—which we found to be characteristic both of the German temper and of Emerson's mind,—is a strongly developed sense for the spiritual unity of *all* things, a strongly developed conscious-

ness of the supremacy of the infinite whole of which all individual beings are only parts, a divining perception of the spirituality, or collective personality, of the universe; and here again is seen a point of contact between Emerson and Germany. How deeply German mysticism of the Middle Ages had drawn from this well of the Infinite, how strongly it had imbued even the popular mind with the idea of self-surrender and absorption in the divine spirit, may be illustrated by an anecdote of the fourteenth century attached to the name of the great preacher and mystic thinker, John Tauler. It is said that at the time when Tauler was at the height of his fame and popularity in Strassburg, one day a simple layman came to him and frankly told him that in spite of all his sacred learning and his fine sermons he was further removed from the knowledge of God than many an unlettered man of the people. Upon the advice of the layman,—so the story runs,—Tauler now withdrew from the world, gave away his books, refrained from preaching, and devoted himself in solitude to prayerful contemplation. Not until two years later did he dare to ascend the pulpit again, but when he attempted to speak, his words failed him; under the scorn and derision of the congregation he was forced to leave the church, and was now considered by everybody a perverted fool. But in this very crisis he discovered the Infinite within himself, the very contempt of the world filled him with the assurance of his nearness to God, the spirit came over him, his tongue loosened as of its own accord, and he suddenly found himself possessed by a power of speech that stirred and swayed the whole city as no preacher ever had done before.

This story of the fourteenth century may be called a symbolic and instinctive anticipation of the well defined philosophic belief in the spiritual oneness of the universe, which was held by all the great German thinkers and poets of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Goethe, Schiller, Novalis, Tieck, Jean Paul, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, however much they differed in temper and specific aims, all agreed in this, that the whole visible manifold world was to them the expression of the same infinite personality, the multiform embodiment of one universal mind; they all saw the crowning glory and divinity of man in his capacity to feel this unity of the world, to hear the voice of the world spirit within him, to be assured of its eternity in spite of the constant change and decay of visible forms.

Again there is no need of commenting upon the close affinity of all this with Emerson's views of spiritual personality. But, by way of illustration, it may be fitting to place side by side with each other two utterances, one by Emerson, the other by Novalis, upon the essential

unity underlying all life,—utterances which, but for the difference of style and artistic quality, might have come from the same man. This is Novalis:—

“Nature has all the changes of an infinite soul, and surprises us through her ingenious turns and fancies, movements and fluctuations, great ideas and oddities, more than the most intellectual and gifted man. She knows how to vivify and beautify everything, and, though there seems to reign in individual things an unconscious, meaningless mechanism, the eye that sees deeper recognizes nevertheless a wondrous sympathy with the human heart. * * * Does not the rock become an individual ‘Thou’ in the very moment that I address it? And in what way do I differ from the brook when I look down into its waves with tender sadness and lose my thoughts in its movement as it glides on?”

And here is Emerson’s somewhat dilettanteish, but after all unerring, speculation:—

“The granite is differenced in its laws only by the more or less of heat from the river that wears it away. The river, as it flows, resembles the air that flows over it; the air resembles the light which traverses it with more subtle currents; the light resembles the heat which rides with it through space. Each creature is only a modification of the other; the likeness in them is more than the difference, and their radical law is one and the same. So intimate is this unity that, it is easily seen, it lies under the undermost garment of nature and betrays its source in Universal Spirit. * * * It is one central fire, which, flaming now out of the lips of Etna, lightens the capes of Sicily, and now out of the throat of Vesuvius, illuminates the towers and vineyards of Naples. It is one light which beams out of a thousand stars. It is one soul which animates all men.”

As the fourth, and last, evidence of temperamental affinity between German character and Emerson,—an affinity resting, I repeat, upon the common basis of insistence on personality,—I mention courage of personal conviction and disdain of intellectual compromises. I mention this point last, because it seems to me the most important of all. It cannot be denied that in a country where every one is constantly affected, in one way or another, by that which the masses think, desire, or dislike, there is no greater danger for the individual than the lack of intellectual differentiation. Democracy is by no means the only, or necessarily the best, safeguard for intellectual independence. On the contrary, it may foster the desire in the individual to adapt himself to a generally accepted standard of opinion, to avoid frictions, to smooth down the sharp corners of personal conviction, to shun principles, to embrace opportunism. I cannot rid myself of the impression that American university and college life shows the effect of this natural tendency. There is a decided monotony of type, a prevalence of mediocrity about it. There are few

college professors who are more than good college professors, few that stand for some great principle, few fighters, few leaders of public opinion, few of whom it might be said that they represent the national conscience. It is different in Germany. The German *likes* contrasts; he *likes* friction; he *likes* intellectual controversy; he identifies himself with the cause which he represents, and since he loses himself in his cause, he does not hesitate to use plain speech, even at the risk of being too plain for some ears. I do not close my eyes to the defects which are the concomitant trait of this national characteristic. It has undoubtedly led in German political life to so bewildering a variety of inimical factions and party platforms as to make parliamentary government well-nigh impossible; it gives to German scientific controversy often a tone of personal bitterness and acrimoniousness which to outsiders cannot be but repulsive or amusing. And yet it is true that here are the very roots of German greatness. It is intellectual courage which has made Germany, in spite of state omnipotence and clerical supremacy, the home of free thought; it is the disdain of compromises which lends to life in Germany, with all its drawbacks, its oddities, its quarrelsomeness, its lack of urbanity, such an intense and absorbing interest; it is the insistence upon principle which makes the German universities the chosen guardians of national ideals, which draws into their service the freest, most progressive, and boldest minds of the country, which endows them with the best of republicanism.

Emerson was not a university man in the German sense. But of all American writers of the century none has expressed or lived out this fundamental tenet of German university life as completely as he. Indeed his whole life-work was one continuous defiance of the standards of the multitude, whether fashionable or otherwise. In his resignation from the pastorate; in his resistance against official obligations which would have hemmed in his free activity; in his advocacy of manual training for children, of the elective system in college studies; in his championship of the workman against the encroachments of industrialism; in his speeches against Daniel Webster and the Fugitive Slave Law,—everywhere the same free, undaunted, self-reliant personality, “a reformer” (to quote his own description of the ideal American), “a reformer not content to slip along through the world like a footman or a spy, escaping by his nimbleness and apologies as many knocks as he can, but a brave and upright man, who must find or cut a straight road to everything excellent in the earth, and not only go honorably himself, but make it easier for all who follow him to go in honor and with benefit.” And so it has come to pass that he unconsciously characterized himself and his mission for the American people in that noble passage of the “Lecture on the Times”:—

"Now and then comes a bolder spirit, I should rather say, a more surrendered soul, more informed and led by God, which is much in advance of the rest, quite beyond their sympathy, but predicts what shall soon be the general fulness; as when we stand by the seashore, whilst the tide is coming in, a wave comes up the beach far higher than any foregoing one, and recedes; and for a long while none comes up to that mark; but after some time the whole sea is there and beyond it."

II.

Thus far we have been considering certain traits of character which reveal an inner affinity between Emerson and the German mind. But—as is well known—there is a more immediate and direct connection between the two. Emerson has a similar relation to the great German idealists of the eighteenth century as the Apostles were thought by the church to have to the Prophets. He is inspired by their thought, transmitted to him for the most part by Coleridge and Carlyle; he adds little to it that is original or new, but he applies it to the needs of his time and his people; and since he speaks to a free people, a people entering with youthful energy upon a career of boundless activity, he gives to this thought an even greater vitality, a more intensely human vigor than it had in the hands of his masters.

What were the main features of the new humanism held up to the world by the great Germans of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, by Kant, Schelling, and Fichte, by Goethe, Schiller, and Novalis? In the first place, an absolute freedom from traditional authority. Probably never in the history of mankind has there been a period when men looked at things from as broad a point of view and with so little bias. Humanity in the largest sense was the chosen study of the age. Everywhere,—in language, in literature, in political institutions, in religion,—men tried to detect the human element and brought it to light with all the fearlessness of scientific ardor. With this boldness of research there was allied, secondly, a supreme interest in the inner life. Man was considered bound up, to be sure, with the world of the senses, and confined to it as the scene of his activity, yet essentially a spiritual being, determining the material world rather than determined by it, responsible for his actions to the unerring tribunal of his own moral consciousness. In the sea of criticism and doubt which had swept away traditional conceptions and beliefs, this inner consciousness appeared as the one firm rock. Here, so it seemed, were the true foundations for a new religious belief, a belief which maintains that it is absolutely impossible to serve God otherwise than by fulfilling one's duties to men, a belief which considers the divine rather as the final goal than

as the preëxisting cause of life. And lastly, there was a joyous optimism in the men of this age which could not help raising them into a higher sphere. They believed in the future. They believed in eternity. They believed that humanity was slowly advancing toward perfection, that a time must come when the thoughts of the few wise men, the dreams of the few poets and prophets would become transfused into the life-blood of the masses, when the good would be done because it is the good, when instinct and duty would be reconciled; and they derived their highest inspirations from the feeling that they themselves were workers in the service of this cause.

It is easy to see that here are found side by side all the essential elements of Emerson's spiritual world,—his freedom from tradition, his deep interest in man, his belief in moral freedom and in the moral order of the universe, his pantheism, his optimism, his confiding trust in the perfectibility of the race. But it is worth noticing that in the application of these principles there is,—as I intimated before,—a decided difference between Emerson and his masters. The great German idealists, while embracing the human race in their thought, while glorying in the idea of a strong and free popular life, addressed themselves in reality to a small circle of elect spirits; these they hoped to influence; to them they adapted their manner of presentation; with the people at large they had little to do. They were, in other words, with all their democratic sympathies, at heart thoroughly aristocratic. The result is that German literature of that period, both poetry and prose, bears for the most part the stamp of a certain over-refinement, of studied culture; that it often lacks simplicity and the strong, direct appeal to the popular heart.

It must further be borne in mind that the condition of the German people at that time was one of utter political disintegration, that the very foundations of national existence were crumbling away, one after another, before the onslaught of foreign invasion, and that the task of the future was nothing less than a complete reorganization of public life. Whatever there is, then, in German literature of that time of popular appeal is dictated by distress, by the bitter need of the hour, and has to do with the death agony of a social order sinking into ruins, and the birth throes of a new order not yet fully formed.

Emerson, on the other hand, although his life was spent amid the most refined circles of New England culture, although his own utterances never fail to appeal to the finest and most elevated aspirations of the human heart, yet always looked beyond his own cultivated surroundings into the wider spheres of common, ordinary life. With all his aristocratic bearing and predilections, he was at heart thoroughly democratic. And

the people to which he gave his life's work was not a nation threatened in its existence, crippled, defeated, but a nation that only recently had won its freedom, a healthy young giant, teeming with untried power and latent vitality, unexperienced but perfectly normal, untouched by disappointment, a vast future in his loins. Is it a wonder that Emerson's application of German idealism should, on the whole, have been more sane, more normal, more vigorous, more genuinely popular, more universally human than German idealism itself?

Let me illustrate this side of Emerson's relation to Germany by a brief parallel between Emerson and that German thinker with whom he bears the most striking resemblance, although he was acquainted with his thought only through the medium of Carlyle's writings. Johann Gottlieb Fichte. There is no greater or more inspiring figure in intellectual history than Fichte's. In originality and constructiveness of thought he so far surpasses Emerson that the two can hardly be mentioned together. It is as men, as writers, as citizens, that they should be compared.

Fichte's historic task was this: to concentrate the German mind, dissipated by over-indulgence in æsthetic culture, upon the one topic of national reorganization. He felt clearly that Germany's future could be saved only through an entire change of heart. What had brought on the national catastrophe, what had made the ancient glory of Germany go down before the triumphant standard of Napoleon, was, to his mind, the unchecked rule of egotism; what was to insure national salvation, was, according to him, unconditional self-surrender. As he himself says:—

“The rational life consists in this, that the individual should forget himself in the species, sacrificing his existence to the existence of the whole; while the irrational life consists in this, that the individual should not consider or love anything but himself and should devote his whole existence to his own well being. And if the rational is the good and the irrational the bad, then there is only one virtue: to forget one's self; and only one vice: to think of one's self.”

This, then, was the appeal which Fichte made to his over-cultivated, over-individualized, and thereby disorganized nation. Whatever progress mankind thus far has made,—for there is progress even in decay,—whatever blessings of civilization we possess, it has been made possible only through the privations, the sufferings, the self-sacrifice of men who, before our time, lived and died for the life of the race. Let us emulate these men. Let every one of us be a public character. Let our philosophers and poets be conscious that it is not they but the universal spirit in them which speaks through their thought or their song, that it would be a sin against the spirit

to degrade their talents to the bondage of personal ambition and vanity. Let our political life be free from despotism and monopoly; let our social institutions be regulated on the basis of a common obligation of each to all. Let the working classes be made to feel "that they serve, not the caprice of an individual, but the good of the whole, and this only so far as the whole is in need of them." Let the rich live in such a manner as to be able to say, "Not a farthing of our profits is spent without a benefit to higher culture; our gain is the gain of the community." Let the ideal of a perfect society be the guiding motive of the age:—

"Nothing can live by itself and for itself; everything lives in the whole, and the whole continually sacrifices itself to itself in order to live anew. This is the law of life. Whatever has come to the consciousness of existence must fall a victim to the progress of all existence. Only there is a difference whether you are dragged to the shambles like a beast with bandaged eyes or whether, in full and joyous presentiment of the life which will spring forth from your sacrifice, you offer yourself freely on the altar of eternity."

In times of distress, in any great national crisis, this splendid appeal of Fichte's for self-surrender of the individual will prove its inspiring force, will ever anew demonstrate its imperishable worth. But it can hardly be denied that it bears the earmarks of the extraordinary and exceptional times which forced it from Fichte's mind. Its Spartan rigor, the demand of state omnipotence implied in it, and actually drawn as its consequence by Fichte himself, its tendency toward uniformity in education, its stoic contempt for the instinctive, do not make it a safe rule for all times and all nations, and therefore detract from its universally human value.

Emerson's historic task was this: to expand the consciousness of the American people, preoccupied with material prosperity, to a full realization of its spiritual mission. He did not lack penetration into the evils of the time and of the society surrounding him, nor did he spare the scourge of sarcasm and moral indignation in chastising these evils. What more drastic summing up of the degrading and belittling influence of wealth has ever been given than in his contrasting of father and son—the father a self-made man, the son a creature of circumstance:—

"Instead of the masterly good humor and sense of power and fertility of resource in himself; instead of those strong and learned hands, those piercing and learned eyes, that supple body, and that mighty and prevailing heart which the father had, whom nature loved and feared, whom snow and rain, water and land, beast and fish, seemed all to know and to serve,—we have now a puny, protected person, guarded by walls and curtains, stoves and down beds, coaches and men-servants and women-servants from the earth and the sky, and who, bred to depend on all these, is made anxious by all that endangers those possessions, and is forced to spend so much time in guarding

them, that he has quite lost sight of their original use, namely, to help him to his ends, to the prosecution of his love, to the helping of his friend, to the worship of his God, to the enlargement of his knowledge, to the serving of his country, to the indulgence of his sentiment; and he is now what is called a rich man,—the menial and runner of his riches.”

And there are whole philippics against plutocracy contained in such sentences as, “The whole interest of history lies in the fortunes of the poor,” or in the lines:—

“‘Tis the day of the chattel; web to weave and corn to grind;
Things are in the saddle and ride mankind.”

But Emerson did not find himself, as Fichte did, in the midst of a national breakdown. The social evils against which he directed his criticism and invective were concomitant phenomena of a national development, at bottom sound and full of promise. His message, therefore, while fully accepting Fichte’s appeal for self-surrender of private interests to public purposes, culminated not in the demand of concentration, but in the demand of expansion of the individual. To him as to Fichte the common welfare was the highest goal; to him as to Fichte every individual, the farmer, the mechanic, the business man, the scholar, the artist, was, above all, a public servant. But this service consisted to him primarily in the fullest development of all higher instincts, in keeping (as he expressed it) one’s source higher than one’s tap, and in the freest possible blending together of individual activities. Nothing was further removed from his ideals than patriarchalism or state omnipotence; never would he have been willing to entrust the training of the rising generation to the exclusive control of the state, never would he have submitted to the limitations of a socialistic community. To the last he adhered to the principle formulated in the best years of his manhood, “A personal ascendancy,—that is the only fact much worth considering”; to the last he saw the hope of the future in keeping this spirit alive:—

“In the brain of a fanatic; in the wild hope of a mountain boy, called by city boys very ignorant, because they do not know what his hope has certainly appraised him shall be; in the love glance of a girl; in the hair-splitting conscientiousness of some eccentric person who has found some new scruple to embarrass himself and his neighbors withal, is to be found that which shall constitute the times to come.”

May we not, without disparaging the splendid services of Fichte and the other German idealists, say that here there is a message containing more of universal truth, more wisdom applicable to the common, natural,

and normal needs of humanity, than is to be found in their noble and extraordinary flights?

III.

Emerson belongs to the world. But it seems as though at the present moment there was no country which had a greater claim upon his services and a more urgent need of them than Germany. It cannot be denied that the great political struggles and achievements, the remarkable industrial and commercial development of the last fifty years have, for the moment, stifled somewhat the German genius, or at least diverted it from its spiritual flight. Our age has accomplished gigantic tasks. It has brought about the welding together of some thirty mutually jealous and distrustful states and principalities into one united nation; it has carried through a war crowned with unparalleled victories and triumphs; it has changed Germany from a prevailing agricultural country to one of the great manufacturing centres of the globe; it has made her one of the foremost competitors in the policy of expansion now dominating the world. All this belongs to the realm of fact rather than to the realm of the spirit. It has led to an over-emphasis of the will; it has blunted the feeling; it has crippled the moral sense; it has clogged speculation; it has brutalized personality.

Religious life in modern Germany is almost wholly latent. I do not doubt that it exists, not only among the thousands of devoted men and women who serve the church of their fathers in traditional manner and form, but, perhaps, even more among the millions who have turned away with hatred and contempt from rituals and creeds which to them have become empty phrases. But the fact remains that there is no form of religious life in Germany which could in any way be said to be a true expression of the national conscience. In ethical theories the average German of today, whether consciously or not, is a follower of Nietzsche. He believes in personality, but it is not the personality of the great German idealists of a century ago, the personality which is a part of the infinite spirit, a visible manifestation of the divine,—but the personality of the cynic author of "*Menschliches-Allzumenschliches*," a bundle of animal instincts, of the desire for self-preservation and self-gratification, the thirst for power, the impulse to create and to command. In the sciences,—both mental and physical,—the man of facts, the specialist, is the man of the hour; and whatever may be said in favor of specialization as the only sound basis of scientific research (there clearly is no other equally sound), the exclusive rule of specialization has undoubtedly given to our whole scholarly life something spiritless, narrow, mechanical.

Nobody has felt this more deeply and expressed it more clearly than Herman Grimm, the last great representative of the golden age of German literature who reached into our own time. He says:—

“We have the facts in our heads, we are flush and ready at any time to pay out in cash any amount of knowledge up to the limit of our drafts. But the marriage of our thoughts with the spirit which shelters them is a cool marriage of convention without communion and without children. Nowhere do we dare to draw ultimate consequences. What goes beyond the sphere of fact, of that which can be proven by positive evidence, is looked upon as dangerous conjecture. Only the unimpeachable is loudly expressed and that opinion is passed by with frowning silence which has no other foundation than the deep conviction of him who uttered it.”

All the foregoing, it seems to me, must have made it apparent why Germany at the present moment in a peculiar and pregnant sense is ripe for Emerson. Emerson, as we have seen, is allied to the German mind by a deep and close affinity. He has the German love of individuality, the German seriousness of purpose and contempt of sham, the German delight in small things, the German sense of the infinite, the German intellectual courage and disdain of compromise. In addition to this, he derived his highest and best thought to a large extent from the bountiful store of German idealism of a hundred years ago, and he enriched this thought and gave it still wider significance by applying it to the needs of a free, youthful nation. Now the time has come for Germany to receive from Emerson. Now the time has come for Emerson to pay back to Germany what he owes to her. Now the time has come for him to restore to Germany the idealism of her own thinkers in a purified, saner, and more truly human form.

This is not mere speculation. Emerson's career in Germany has already begun. No less a man than Herman Grimm first drew attention to him as one of the truly great, as a spiritual power, as a helper and comforter, as a deliverer from the cynicism, pessimism, and fact-worship of the present day. He said in one of his earliest essays:—

“Emerson is a perfect swimmer in the element of modern life. He does not fear the tempests of the future; because he divines the calm which will follow them. He does not hate, contradict, combat; because his understanding of men and their defects is too great, his love for them too strong. I cannot but follow his steps with deep reverence and look at him with wonder, as he divides the chaos of modern life gently and without passion into its several provinces. A long acquaintance has assured me of him; and thinking of this man I feel that in times of old there really could be teachers with whom their disciples were ready to share any fate, because everything appeared to them doubtful and lifeless without the spirit of the man whom they were following.”

Grimm's genuine admiration did not remain without effect upon thinking men in Germany. Gradually but steadily the circle of Emerson's influence widened. Julian Schmidt, Friedrich Spielhagen were affected by him; even Nietzsche could not resist his personality. From the eighties on, two Austrian writers helped to increase his following: Anton E. Schönbach, to whom we owe the first objectively critical account in German of Emerson's work, and Karl Federn, who first published a comprehensive translation of his essays. Just now a second, and more ambitious, edition of Emerson's works in German is being published in Leipzig.

Meanwhile there has been gathering strength, independently from Emerson, a movement which is bound to draw still wider circles of German intellectual life toward Emerson, a reaction against the pessimism of Schopenhauer, the cynicism of Nietzsche, the soulless monotony of scientific specialization. Herman Grimm's own life-work, his incessant insistence on artistic culture, on a free, noble, reverent personality, was perhaps the initial force in this spiritual reawakening. But other and younger men have followed in his steps. The signs of the time are full of promise. The extraordinary success of such a book as Harnack's "Essence of Christianity"; the widespread influence of such a university teacher, such a wise, free, kindly man of ideals as Friedrich Paulsen; the devoted efforts of Pastor Naumann, of Bruno Wille, of Wilhelm Bölsche, and others, to win the masses back to spiritual hope and an enlightened faith; the new life kindled in poetry, the novel, and the drama,—all this is conclusive evidence that we are on the very verge of a new era of German idealism. And if it comes, there will come with it the demand: less Nietzsche and more Emerson; and a new intellectual bond between America and Germany will have been established.

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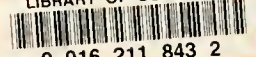


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